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Home Is Where the Hot Tamale Is: Rediscovering the Delta

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HOME IS WHERE THE HOT TAMALE IS: REDISCOVERING THE DELTA

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ABSTRACT

This thesis project is an in-depth personal exploration of the hot tamale in the Mississippi Delta, presented in a long-form magazine piece. It analyzes the cultural exchange that brought the hot tamale to the region in the early 20th century, its racial representation in the Delta, and its future as chefs across the nation seek to interpret the regional cuisine. Further, this thesis analyzes the hot tamale's components that tell why and how the hot tamale became a staple, and the story of hardship and discrimination that it symbolizes. Traveling through my own past, this piece reflects the interactions that I had with hot tamales growing up, and the evolution of understanding that led me to learn about my homeland and the people that live there. Through personal interviews and scholarly texts, the research used to produce this project focuses on the Mississippi Delta's past and present economy and cultural norms that affect the way of life for its citizens.

DEDICATION

This thesis project is dedicated to the who taught me to love the Mississippi Delta. In particular, I'd like to thank the hot tamale makers near and far who work to keep the tradition alive, and my parents for raising me with compassion towards others and always supporting my dreams.

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Additionally, I am grateful for the generosity and hospitality of hot tamale makers and eaters in the Delta, particularly Charles Signa, Anne Martin Vetrano, and the Scott family, who taught me more than I could ever imagine about the place I call home.

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It was a cool day in April when I visited a single-story pinky mauve house in Metcalfe, Mississippi. It was in the mid ‘50s and windy, sideways rain hitting windows like splattering bugs on a summer night’s drive. “Come on,” Loretta said, backing up through the door giving me a sign to enter. I knew I was at the right place the minute I stepped out of my car onto the water-soaked lawn. Rich, savory, abundantly spiced—the intoxicating scent hit me like a two-ton truck, unaltered or perhaps made even stronger by the rain. Inside that large concrete-floored room, the smell intensified, a familiar one I knew all too well. I removed my jacket hood and looked around. Ten deep brown eyes stared back, inquisitive yet welcoming, and maybe a bit skeptical. In front of me was the legacy of Scott’s Hot Tamales, the children of those who started it all.

“Let’s go up front,” said Loretta, as she and her older sister Hazel led me through the house, around stoves with simmering vats of tamales, and deep rounded metal pots stacked neatly against the walls. The front room was small but comfortable, covered in dainty white striped floral wallpaper, big pieces of furniture, and family photos placed all around.

My eyes were drawn to a wooden framed portrait of a woman hanging on the opposite wall near a big stack of trophies, her stark white hair a deep contrast to her richly toned brown skin. This was Elizabeth, the matriarch of the Scott family, who took roost during her later years in the green corduroy chair to my left, where Hazel was now sitting. She kept watch over her beloved family and prized business and was independent, as independent as a one-legged woman

in her 90s could be. She married Aaron Scott in 1941, but the hot tamale business didn't begin until about 1950 when the two moved back to Benoit, Mississippi, where Elizabeth was born.

The couple had been living in San Antonio, Texas, where Aaron was stationed with the U.S. Army. Elizabeth, pregnant at the time, developed an untamable craving for hot tamales, and rather than continue buying them, Aaron was determined that they would make their own. He bought a recipe from a Mexican man and they worked to tweak it to their liking. The first batch took the newcomers an entire night to make, but they kept going. After the Mississippi move and some much-needed practice, they started making hot tamales for friends and family around Benoit. Soon their casual side business turned into push carts around town and later that turned into a permanent walk-up stand in Greenville.

All 11 Scotts——six girls, three boys, Aaron and Elizabeth—once lived in the home where I was sitting, one that carpenter Aaron built from the ground with his own two hands. Though Elizabeth passed in 2016, and her husband and business partner much earlier in 1987, their hot tamales continue to serve as a staple Delta food, as their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren keep business afloat and expanding. Today, Scott's Hot Tamales operates out of that same stand, just in a different location across town, where thousands are sold each week, and 40 dozen more are shipped to folks in all 50 states. Each and every hot tamale is mixed, rolled, and tied by members of the Scott family in Aaron and Elizabeth's small Metcalfe home.

The first time I tried a Scott's hot tamale was a near religious experience—succulent shredded beef brisket peeking out beneath a thin layer of the spicy cornmeal mixture. As the tamale unwrapped, it became encapsulated by the savory, rust colored broth which soaked the accompanying saltine crackers with each bite. I thought God himself had come down to prepare

that heavenly snack and I knew immediately I had found a new favorite. Now, those mouthwatering memories rushed back as I sat there with Loretta and Hazel. This was my journey home, my chance to discover the complexities of my native land through the food that put the region on the map.

I GREW UP just 10 miles south of Metcalfe in Greenville, Mississippi, and lived there for more than 19 years before moving off to college. I don't recall my first hot tamale because I was too young to remember it. But, I can guarantee it was from Doe's Eat Place, a legendary steak house in downtown Greenville. When it came to hot tamales, Doe's was all I knew—savory ground beef and cornmeal, rolled up in parchment paper and tied in groups of three with white string. It wasn't until I moved away that I realized how special the Delta hot tamale was, and not just Doe's but every single tamale from the dozens of makers that sprinkled that flat alluvial soiled region. They'd been there forever, as far as I was concerned, so why hadn't I taken notice? Why hadn't I understood the power that the hot tamale holds in the Mississippi Delta? I think like most other Deltans, I didn't know that I should care.

I'm a white private school-educated girl from an upper middle-class family, whose only close prolonged relationship with black people was with the two, maybe three who I went to school with, the women who once worked in my grandmother's house—cooking, cleaning, gardening—and my own family's beloved maid Mary, who passed away in 2015 after a battle with diabetes. It wasn't that I tried to avoid black people, I just never got the opportunity to mingle with many of them. Blacks go to public school and whites go to private. Blacks live in old worn downtown homes and whites live in conjugated new neighborhoods farther south. Blacks get their hot tamale fix at Scott's, but we go to Doe's.

Greenville is a town of 33,000 right on the Mississippi River, boasting rich black soil that grows the most vibrantly lush crops you've ever seen. It's home to the blues—B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson—and renowned authors like Shelby Foote, Walker Percy, and Ellen Douglas. It's a region where the bright blue sky seems bigger above the soaring flattened land (the only hills are Indian Mounds and the levee). It's made up of about 80% black and 20% white, with a small amount of Asians and Hispanics, and is one of the poorest regions in the country bearing a poverty rate more than double the national average. It just so happens, that Greenville, the "Heart of the Delta," is also "Hot Tamale Capitol of the World," and that's no coincidence.

CRACK OPEN A HOT TAMALE, and apprehend each part, and you'll learn there's been stagnation in the Delta labor force for a long time, according to Southern Foodways Alliance (SFA) director and author John T. Edge. "It tells you that migration in Mississippi and the South is nothing new, it tells you about cultural exchange, it tells you about the cotton economy in the South, it tells you that African American and Mexican American foodways have something in common."

Most believe hot tamales have Mexican origin, brought to the region in the early twentieth century when migrant workers came to harvest cotton. Mississippi was the epicenter of cotton production during that time, and because cotton was a labor-intensive crop, Mississippi also became the epicenter of farm labor. According to public health reports, the first considerable amount of Mexicans, a total of 461, came to the Mississippi Delta in 1925 by way of Texas. They were mostly men (a small number brought their families) who lived in shacks on plantations and spent long scorching hot days in fields picking cotton. Southern foodways

experts theorize Mexican workers brought tamales for lunch and ate them in the fields alongside black workers who then tried them and adapted the recipe, adding spice and other flavors to make them the hot tamale we know today. During his exploration of the food, Edge found evidence at the Catholic Diocese in Jackson, Mississippi, of priests writing back to the Catholic Church requesting Spanish-speaking priests "because there were so many laborers coming in from Texas and Mexico. There were also provisioning requests for shucks and masa and other ingredients," he said.

This was post-slavery, but pre-Civil Rights Movement. Blacks were still enduring horrid, slave-like conditions, working for little to nothing and facing severe discrimination. When food was scarce, along came the hot tamale—simple, portable, and tasty. They were made out of pork and corn which were basic, easily accessible and affordable ingredients that translated beyond cultural and racial lines. Hot tamales were a poor man's food born out of necessity that "proved to be a viable support system—financially and nutritionally—to rural communities throughout the area," according to *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Not only did they sustain the hungry, they later provided income for those who took on the labor-intensive trade.

HOT TAMALES ARE A LOT OF WORK.

"My brother gets up at 5 in the mornin," said Hazel. "He's the one that mixes the meal up. We get to work at 7 and get to doing other stuff. Loretta will start cutting shucks, and I'll start doing shucks and whatever, and then at 8 I prepare myself to start turning down the hot tamales." The meat (Scott's uses beef brisket) is prepared the night before and chilled, but on hot tamale making day the family gathers, each with their own designated duty. The meal and meat are loaded into the extruder, a machine that forms the hot tamales by pressing a portion of beef

brisket inside a cylindrical tube of corn meal. Hazel catches the tamales as they come out, passing them along to be placed in a corn husk. Then, the tamales are rolled in the husks and tied in groups with string before reaching a spicy hot bath of simmering broth. The hands-on process takes hours, but they don't mind. It's tradition, one their parents would be proud to see has continued.

Delta hot tamales are different than Mexican tamales. They're made with cornmeal instead of masa, they're boiled in a heavily spiced liquid rather than steamed, and they're small and skinny unlike the fatter Mexican variety. Yet, their clear similarities represent undeniable cultural exchange between the two groups, a sort of give and take process in which the cultures merged.

In his book *Dispatches from Pluto*, author Richard Grant wrote "Mississippi had the most lynchings, the worst Klan violence, the staunchest resistance to the civil rights movement." Though Blacks undoubtedly faced the most horrific discrimination, other ethnic groups endured racially motivated injustice, too. It turns out, just about every ethnicity that didn't appear purely Caucasian faced some type of discrimination. Mexicans were prohibited from public facilities, segregated from white schools, and endured unjust treatment daily. Other prominent ethnic groups in Mississippi like the Chinese weren't allowed to attend white churches and schools, or utilize white hospitals, hotels, or restaurants. Italians were called slanderous names like Dagos, and were continuously ridiculed, some even lynched.

In Clarksdale a Lebanese family, the Davises, owns Abe's BBQ. One of their specialties? Hot tamales. In Vicksburg, a Cuban man named Henry Solly started Solly's Hot Tamales. In Greenville, Italian-owned Doe's Eat Place is the best-known hot tamale seller in the city, and in more than a dozen spots scattered throughout the flatland, African Americans hold the reigns as

the undeniable gatekeepers of the hot tamale tradition. What began as a Mexican food, turned into an African American food and permeated Italian and Lebanese cultures, as well. As far as the Chinese population, I've yet to find a hot tamale-style egg roll, but I doubt I'm the first to think of it. Now, everyone eats hot tamales—white, black, rich, poor. More, everyone claims the hot tamale. It's a food that transcends boundaries, not necessarily bringing people together, but serving as an unspoken commonality. According to Edge. "It's not which culture owns the food, but how it has become a hybridized product of these different cultures."

"HOT TAMALES DON'T DISCRIMINATE," Chicago restaurateur Eldridge Williams told me over the phone, his voice deep but clear. "They love everyone and everyone loves them."

The Memphis native opened The Delta in Chicago's Wicker Park in the fall of last year as an ode to Mississippi, serving up food he calls familiar, but special in its composition and presentation. One of their most popular offerings is hot tamales.

"We call it Mississippi Delta cuisine, not just Southern cuisine," he said. "As much as I love Southern cuisine, it has lost its identity. People think it's just macaroni and cheese, and fried chicken and candied yams, but there's so much more," he said.

With family from the Mississippi Delta, Williams grew up eating and enjoying hot tamales, without understanding their cultural value. But, when he decided to open up a restaurant in Chicago, he knew he needed a niche, something that Chicago hadn't seen before. More, he knew he needed a restaurant that told a story, and he found it in The Delta. "There's nothing that has a story quite like the Delta. You have a huge Asian community, Italians, Hispanics, Lebanese, and the Civil Rights have moved and shaped the Delta. I wanted to be a part of

something that was more than just food and beverage, something that would introduce people to that food and that culture and that part of the world."

The menu at The Delta evokes conversation, with words like cush and boudin studding the seemingly Southern dishes' descriptions. At the top is their hot tamales served up three ways—their classic Red Hot, Vegan Red Hot and Jim Shoe, a total odd ball with lamb, beef, pastrami and provolone. These aren't the average greasy tamales you'll find in the Mississippi Delta. They're made with upscale ingredients and they're trendy, artfully presented in perfectly sized cast-iron dishes with splay of saltines, or served open-face with toppings and garnishes. Perhaps The Delta's take is a representation of the future and spread of the Delta hot tamale as chefs across the country attempt to interpret the iconic regional food.

During all of those years I never knew that the savory snack that I so craved held such pain and hardship, that each bite bound me to the region's shameful past of poverty and inequality. But now that I knew, I ate with more than just taste in mind. I ate knowing that the hot tamale was a resourceful triumph of the past that represented all of the people that made up the Delta region. And I ate with hopefulness of its future.

One morning after Loretta spent the night with her mother whose health was failing, she spotted a male figure donning a white t-shirt walk down the hall, stop briefly near her room, and continue into the kitchen. "I said what's my brother doing here? It's Sunday morning," she explained. But when she got up no one had been there. After a visiting church parishioner also asked about a man roaming the house, the sisters knew that their long-gone father's spirit was there. They say their mother's lives at a relative's house, keeping watch over a child who has been known to stare longingly at her photographs and break out into unexplainable laughter.

Maybe it’s just their imagination, or perhaps Aaron and Elizabeth are keeping watch over the hot tamale tradition even today.

REPORT

On the banks of the Mississippi River lies the Mississippi Delta, a flat farming region with rich alluvial soil and lush crops to match. It's one of the poorest regions in the entire country, with a poverty level more than double the national average. It's also one of the unhealthiest places, where many of its citizens are "food insecure," meaning they lack access to enough nutritious food to keep them healthy. Greenville is the largest town in the region, often called the "Heart of the Delta," but that is not the town's only identifier. Greenville, Mississippi, is "Hot Tamale Capitol of the World," a title given to the town of 31,000 in 2013 by former mayor Chuck Jordan who called the region "a hotbed of hot tamales." Greenville, Mississippi, is also my hometown.

This thesis project is a personal exploration of my homeland, the Mississippi Delta, through the lens of the region's most unique food—the hot tamale. From its history and its meat and meal makeup, to its symbolism and representation, this project is an in-depth, first-hand look at how the Delta hot tamale came to be a regional staple. Further, it is a personal journey of understanding and learning about the Delta region, traveling through my own experience with hot tamales and their makers growing up, and coming to understand what and who the hot tamale truly represents.

Relying primarily on personal interviews and scholarly texts, I chose to include in this piece a balance of historical findings and present-day facts, along with personal accounts from hot tamale makers and Southern food experts. One of the most influential interviews that I gathered was with the Scott family who owns Scott's Hot Tamales in Greenville.

I sat down with Loretta and Hazel, daughters of the original founders, and learned immensely about their hot tamale business and the hot tamale culture in the Delta, especially the importance of family and tradition. Sitting in their late parents' home (which doubles as their hot tamale factory), we discussed the misconceptions of the Mississippi Delta, how outsiders perceived it as a horrifyingly racial area, still today. I was surprised to find that Hazel and Loretta totally disagreed, claiming they had never experienced such harsh racism. During another interview, John T. Edge, author and director of the Southern Foodways Alliance, challenged me to think more deeply about the hot tamale's representation. Other helpful interviews included ones from Anne Martin Vetrano, author of the *Delta Hot Tamales: History, Stories, & Recipes,* Charles Signa who owns Doe's Eat Place, and Eldridge Williams, owner of Chicago, Illinois,' The Delta, a restaurant focused not on Southern cuisine, but Mississippi Delta cuisine.

Before delving deeply into research, I hypothesized hot tamales brought different cultures together. I recognized a commonality between racial groups in the Mississippi Delta, and quickly assumed that because everyone ate hot tamales, it must be a food that surpasses the racial and cultural divide, but I was wrong. Most people in the Delta do eat hot tamales, but they do not eat them from the same makers. As previously stated, my white upper middle-class family ate hot tamales from Doe's Eat Place, just as much of the rest of the white community does. Until the annual Hot Tamale Festival began in 2013, I was unaware of the more than a dozen hot tamale makers scattered throughout the region. I had heard of a few, but had never tried their offerings, and I did not know where their stands were. This is because those hot tamale stands were in black communities and catered to the black citizens. This was an eye-opening revelation of the division in the Mississippi Delta, forcing me to look at the area truthfully, without forming sweeping cheerful conclusions.

The most impactful piece of information that I learned during this project was the idea of cultural exchange, a term that describes taking customs or traditions from another culture and melding them into one's own. The Mississippi Delta is made up of multiple ethnic groups like Italian, Chinese, Lebanese, and Hispanic, in addition to black and white. I was aware of this before beginning this project, but I did not realize the influence that each group has had on each other, especially regarding the hot tamale. According to the Southern Foodways Alliance (SFA), some theorize the Delta hot tamale came from the Mexican tamale, introduced when Mexican migrant workers came to harvest cotton in the early 20th century. From talking with author and director of the SFA John T. Edge, I came to understand the term cultural exchange and realize its importance when discussing the hot tamale. Through personal interviews and conversations, I learned that many Deltans recognize the hot tamale as an African American food, because they are the primary makers and sellers in the Mississippi Delta. What began as a Mexican food, traveled to the African American culture, influenced Italian and Lebanese cultures, and eventually made it to the white population. Now, everyone eats them and everyone claims them.

The story of the hot tamale has been told many times. It began with Mexican migrant workers, African Americans adopted it, and now they are everywhere. Each story is a story everyone has heard before. Because I am from the Mississippi Delta, I had a unique take on this subject. I saw the racism and racial division first hand, qualities of the Delta that I originally tried to mask. This story was an evolution of honesty in which I was forced to take a step back and realize the Delta still has its hardships. It has gotten better, but it is nowhere near great. This project serves as a personal look into the Delta from a new light—someone who lived there, and finally came to recognize it for what it is. The Delta is a place of the good, the bad, the ugly, and the delicious, and the hot tamale represents each of those.

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